

Across the Stream

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Across the Stream

by [Aguagi](#)

Summary

The destruction of the Primordial Life Fiber was only just the beginning. The sequel to Down the Road.

Chapter 2: Recovery - Or rather, the slow road to it.

Notes

Down the road, or across the stream? One leads to suffering. The other to salvation. The beginning, the end. Let's do it all over again.

For H0saki.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Prologue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

I crossed the stream;

I had a dream

I: Prologue

White.

Purity incarnate.

(Or so it was written.)

White was supposed to represent a world free of corruption, of a time before the stain of original sin set itself upon the fabric of humanity. It was supposed to represent light, the good-willed half of the duality of man. It was supposed to cast away shadows of doubt and decay, to strike fear into the hearts of those who plotted harm and destruction.

A holy color, it was donned by countless men and women alike over the ages that took up the burden of its existence.

But white was so easily corrupted.

And white had been used for evil before.

Red never truly leaves white once it touches upon the other's being. Blood always leaves its mark on silk even if it is washed and scrubbed away. But red never fully recovers either, passing on to waters unknown as infinitesimal fractals, never to again exist as it were.

IN THE BEGINNING, there were the heavens and the earth, a great celestial dome divided by land and sea, a separation millions of years in the making as the planet was shaped and created.

The oceans and fields were desolate, fully formed and yet not hospitable. For countless millennia, rivers of lava flowed as the earth trembled violently at its foundations. Volcanoes shot great gouts of fire and belched dense clouds far into the atmosphere, blanketing sulfur-yellow skies with their filth. And when the Earth finally cooled and life flourished in all its abiogenesiatic beauty to paint the planet in its colors, IT arrived, tearing trails into the skies and sending the newly populated world into turmoil amidst a backdrop of orange and red. Chaos ruled the earth at such a catastrophic impact, devastating earthquakes responding to

IT's call as IT itself answered the call of an advance guard, a lesser fractal of its body that arrived among the lowly primitive species as a single thread. One pangaeic mass split apart to form seven unequal but wonderfully varied pieces. IT embedded deep into the earth, curling and twisting around itself to take the form of those surrounding it. And there IT took root, its branches traveling far and wide to ensnare the breathing and devour them whole when they were unfit to subject themselves as its host.

From death and destruction, the first inklings of humanity millions of years into their development were eventually created, naked and without shame in their immodesty. And it was in their development that they came across IT's sprawling roots, the parasites embedding themselves deep in their fur and gifting them with power in exchange for their very life essence. Guided evolution, where only the hardest of these proto-humans survived its drain and thrived in battle against all others. Where only those best suited to their environment and its crushing demands for sustenance failed to perish.

Such is the fate of livestock.

IN THE BEGINNING , there were the trees of knowledge and life.

IN THE BEGINNING , these trees stood tall and mighty within the developing Pangaea, great avatars of conflicting goals in the Earth's infancy and adorned with fruits both agreeable and contradictory to their named natures. One gifted mankind with everlasting bliss and life, the other to a limited existence full of pain and sorrow. One planted near Gaia's center, one at the edge. For it proved fitting that one must be the center of all things and the other the end of all things in the strip of fertile land that stretched from ocean to ocean and was bordered on both terrestrial sides by unbearable cold and heat.

Infested with these parasites, mankind eventually was fooled into eating of the tree of knowledge and awoke. They realized their nakedness, fashioning themselves coverings out of fig leaves. And with this act condemned themselves to death, forever opening their eyes to good and evil and losing that which made them ignorant. Fearful of the unknown, they were cast far and wide, their identities forgotten.

It was Eba who first came across the true forbidden tree of life, to see it hidden away in a cave with massive branches curling toward the ceiling and illuminating its dark recesses with warm colors. She who invited life and death as mother of all living things was the first to approach its vast trunk and hear its voice, to receive its first and final gift to her. And soon in her hands, a shimmering ball of orange and red lay, its surface impossibly silky and emanating a soft glow.

IT said, **“eat of this fruit, and you shall never know death.”**

Eba ate, and was devoured.

Her veins and skin became fibers, cloth slowly replacing flesh. In place of her heart, the fruit now sat, its grotesque beating form betraying its nature by now giving life rather than siphoning it. This first chimeric fusion of human and clothing. Having tasted of death long ago, she survived life's infusion, her fate ultimately to be forever twined with IT for eternity as a moving, talking part of its body. For as long as Eba remained Eba, she existed for many

hundreds of years, gradually forgetting herself as fibers wholly replaced her body and urged her assimilation into the mass. Becoming the first of many that it devoured in the process. Her fate remaining largely unknown by the humans that roamed the Earth after her time, existence of her and IT's beings jealously protected by her blood-progeny. Successors that created myths and deified them, even as they were unable to do as Eba did and died attempting to become one with the fibers. Heirs that thought it a god and worshipped it thusly, serving its needs and cultured according to its whims when it spoke through her, encouraging others to do the same.

As fitting of domesticated species.

And as the continents continued to slowly drift away, humanity was forced to all corners of the land, unknowingly spreading the life fibers with it when they walked with glimmering strings and threads in their fur. Not knowing their role in the future to come, when parasite selected the best of host and sire and nature played its role with selective pressure. Strength and intelligence in constant rebalance, where the most adaptable and genetically diverse survived and thrived. And on the site of Eba's consumption (on what later became the Kiryuuin lands eons later), IT remained, sleeping and yet undiscovered by humanity at large, the small tribe of peoples that later became the predecessors to the Kiryuuins becoming lost to time. Forgotten, until the most loyal and devoted of all of them rediscovered IT, became the first in over a hundred thousand years to successfully merge themselves with the essence of life itself. To assume her position as IT's emissary, stylizing herself as something like a doomed prophet and setting into motion a plan million of years into the making.

Or so the lore goes.

Much of the tale has been corrupted, infused and tainted by beliefs carried by other tribes and clans, with even the true name of the Primordial Life Fiber obfuscated and lost to dead tongues as civilizations collapsed and languages changed when communities merged. Timelines were erased and rewritten according to mythos, with humanity's beginnings impossibly placed before the separation of the continents. Folk stories forgotten and misunderstood, the origin of the god-fiber's arrival forever wavering between beliefs. Conflicting ideals of life fibers arriving as a single thread before engorging itself on sacrifices of body and blood loyal Kir-yuu-in attendants dutifully gave or as a single thread acting as an advance guard in search of hospitable planets before hailing.

IN THE END, the Primordial Life Fiber met its demise at the hands of she who became one with humanity's disease, heart cleaved by the same person who also cleaved the heart of its protector and guardian. Purity redefined and white defiled by saving blood. Chains shackling humanity's future to a near demise broken, red threads of fate severed by scissors made from their being.

And yet, not completely.

Not while the last revelation remains unseen, not when IT's roots still remain undiscovered, spread far and wide throughout the land, safe from the cleansing fires of the Kiryuuin legacy's destruction.

Not until the very saplings that humanity had inadvertently carried throughout the land on their fur are destroyed.

For while the Primordial Life Fiber was indeed spun from the original fibers that colonized the lonely planet and was indeed slayed by its betrayer guardian, its form was merely the budded, matured phase. Like a fungi, it endures in its roots underground, coiling in the darkness, twisting and threading itself into every facet of the planet. And while it had the chance to grow in genetic variability to best suit the environment and maximize its effects, it was humanity who lost most of theirs.

Codependence. Coevolution. The softening of a species.

For it is adaptability that favors survival. And fibers don't need humans for their own - humanity was merely convenient, the closest stepping stone to cross a shallow pond. And on the day when the heavens would be bound to the Earth once more (as it were in the beginning), it would be this trait that would allow them to infest the far reaches of space, weaving entire galaxies into one thread, one body.

One life and fate for all.

Chapter End Notes

KLK uses Christian elements in the show. The story of creation is prominently used. I tried to meld both it and the accepted theories of Pangaea and of evolution. I ended up with a headache instead. I also attempted to put into practice my hypothesis that the Tree of Life was made of life fibers, because I was 100% sure nobody had thought of that before.

Across the Stream and Down the Road were named for exactly the reason you're thinking of. Thus, they are tied to each other, as morbid as it may be.

Recovery

Chapter Summary

Or rather, the beginning of the long road to recovery.

Chapter Notes

This was originally intended to be published on November 21, in remembrance of a 5-year anniversary that contributed to the naming of this fic.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

II: Recovery

She was sore.

Tired, panting, and frankly quite drained emotionally from the latest end-of-the-month testing Satsuki had mandated for all combat-oriented clubs as part of the first of her decrees as newly-minted Honnouji Academy's Director. She lay against a crumbling cinderblock wall, exhaustion spearing her to the bone and tugging relentlessly on her mind even without the additional burden of an activated kamui. A stab of anger towards the older of the two flashed through her like a bolt of lightning before she could suppress it, lips parting in a snarl to bare wickedly curved cuspids that could be rightfully called *fangs* by the common observer.

A hand absentmindedly fisted a wad of clothing right under where Senketsu's left eye was, and grit her teeth as the harsh thumping of her heart beat against her ribs. Quietly murmuring an apology when he squirmed in pain, she traded her grip for a series of comforting pats, smoothing out the creases and scuffs gained from the most recent bout of fighting.

There were reasons for why the directive existed as equally as there was for why she was the prime candidate to test their effectiveness on, and she certainly wasn't going to complain about that. What she *was* going to give Satsuki a piece of her mind over, however, was the way they went about it - ganging up and attacking her all at once one wave after another in an endless assault rather than at least attempting a semblance of a plan. A veritable rain shower of screaming, braying humans charging for battle, they barely were a cut above the delinquent pricks that kept harassing her in middle school.

However, it wasn't the fact that they were attempting to overwhelm her with their numbers before attacking with everything they had like wild animals. She damn well *lived* for that chaos, thrived in the spirit of the present when all that mattered was you, your fist, and the person standing in your way. She loved the way that the world boiled down to pure instinct, strikes and retaliations captured within an eternity in that single microsecond before impact - dodge left, strafe right, kick, punch, shuto, roundhouse, wrist grab, twist, *snap*, throw.

But...

What they felt was leagues away from her experiences.

It was in the sloppiness of their attacks when they watched her dispatch their friends and fellow club members, in the concentration and control over bowels that they seemed to instantly lose upon sight of her gaze when it locked onto them next. It lingered in the quiet whimpers that escaped their throats once she seemed to teleport across vast spaces to end up snarling face-to-terrified face with them.

They loathed her.

They *feared* her.

It was evident in the way they spoke to her timidly as though as she might rip their throats out with one snap of her jaws if they ever so much as offended her with a perceived slight. It was ever-so present in how their eyes lingered nervously on the horns decorating her head, on the wickedly curved spines lining her spine through the midriff gap where Senketsu failed to cover. It was in their fear of her piercing red eyes and similarly colored vines snaking around her waist and bared skin.

But something dark and dangerous churned within the depths of her chest every time small incidents like these happened - twisted, poisonous feelings briefly that sent her heart aflutter in sick delight. And for the briefest of moments, before she could forcefully calm its excited beats, she honestly, truly enjoyed it. Revelled in it. Felt the urge to chase after it and do *more* than just give them a reason to be nervous. A quiet, sly voice in the back of her head whispered that she rightfully *should*, that they were foolish to challenge her power even if they did possess the aid of kamuis or scissor swords, that she should show them the error of their thoughts.

She pointedly ignored it.

Or at least, tried to as best as she could.

Whether it was born from an awoken nature shared across all life fiber-human fusions or an unfortunate side-effect of being forever bonded to a violent, parasitic kamui, she didn't know.

But the back of her hands itched the longer it unsuccessfully tried to appeal to her, nails unconsciously raking over



✧ 鬼龍院 ✧

✧ 流子 ✧

etched into skin, where glimmering red threads once were to make scissor sword-borne cuts permanently part of her. And sensing her distress through the skips in her heartbeats, Senketsu murmured his comforts, trying his best to support her in any way he could.

Her leg smarted from a barrage of missiles lobbed her way, pulses of dull pain running up slowly flexing muscles in time with every furiously pounding heartbeat. Agony like smoldering flame sharply flared, burning away other thoughts as soon as they appeared and consuming her entirely. Soothing warmth swept over skin battered and gouged and bruised all over from the latest group of students. Purple and blue discolorations soon rapidly greened and yellowed over before her eyes, leaving behind perfectly unicolored flesh in seconds.

With a groan, she got up from where she sat against the ruined gym wall and stretched her limbs, waving away the Ambulance Club's earnest attempts to help. Rubbing a sore shoulder, she glanced at the dojo's entrance as she retrieved her schoolbag and swords, keeping an eye on her newly-defeated opponents as they were carried to the infirmary. Stretchers groaned and dipped with piles of bodies, the paramedics seemingly at a loss as they stared at the literal man-made mountain, undoubtedly whispering amongst themselves on how to properly ferry the injured without accidentally getting injured as well.

Massaging her temples, she decided that reinforcements were in order before *somebody* triggered another human avalanche.

Her hand reached deep into her bag and fished out the smartphone Houka had insisted on getting her after bemoaning the absolute travesty of being an acquaintance of someone that had grown up without the internet, much less a phone. A thumb moved across the plastic-covered surface and tapped against the small smiley-faced widget, ignoring the litany of other messages she had yet to read. Shooting the medical teams a quick message to send more supplies, she ignored their quick, servile response and opted to instead scroll through the neatly spaced lines of texts further down the window. Skimming through the group chat, she could not help but smile at their antics, no matter how exhausted she was.

Mrs. Mankanshoku would be using a new recipe for a get-together later in the week and needed victims - er, volunteers - to sample a trial run.

Mako would be with her father for most of the evening, undoubtedly making a quick buck off the several dozen people Ryuuko just sent to the hospital as head of the Medical club (patient survival not guaranteed). Unlike Dr. Mankanshoku, however, she had a slightly less lethal attendance rate and a more comforting bedside manner. Ryuuko herself had occasionally popped in their wing from time to time, content to watch them going about their day instead of attending the third meeting of the day regarding some school event or whatever; those types of things were usually on briefing stuff she knew about anyway and needed a rubber stamp of approval.

And as if sensing her thoughts, a familiar pink text bubble appeared at the edge of her screen, the brunette's latest messages displayed in equally cheery colors.

>> *Mom says that she prepared an extra portion in case you're not coming home tonight.*

>> *Oh! Are you coming home!? Dad just got some extra yakisoba, and Mataro is eating your port-*

>> *Nevermind!*

>> Gotta go! Just got a new patient!

Classic Mako, Ryuuko thought, pride swelling in her chest at how far her friend came in a little over a year as she quickly texted back her response.

The 'quad squad' (*"It's a great name for us now that we're no longer in Honnouji!"* Uzu insisted) were appropriately split between their uncle's ironworks, their family's shipping company, the konnyaku business, and advanced systems engineering, but were planning to meet up for a quick brunch in the upcoming weekend and had extended an open invitation to other members in the group.

Satsuki would be preoccupied for the rest of the day and most likely wouldn't be able to respond for the next few hours.

Satsuki...

Ryuuko's heart clenched at the mere thought of her - and the word still tasted a little strange on her tongue no matter how much time passed - sister. She'd been meaning to tell the elder about the weird pains she'd been randomly having, but had pushed them aside in the face of her new (and very much unappreciated) duties. Truth be told, she didn't even know how to approach her about them. She let Mako and a couple Nudist Beach medics see if there was anything wrong, but the most they could come up with was inconclusive, blank scans. Her

lips pursed the slightest bit before she could stop herself, the thought of burdening either of them with more of her troubles instantly dismissed.

Satsuki didn't need to hear her sister's problems, especially those that could be dealt with by a helping hand (or fist). Not now, not ever. Not when she already had a full plate as it was.

She'd probably be stuffed somewhere in a conference, in a meeting virtually impossible to tell apart from the dozens of others that had occurred between her person and the newly picked members of Revocs' executive board. Most of them were long-term employees that were a step further down the chain than the poor souls reaped for the Primordial Life Fiber's awakening. They also happened to be the most qualified staff Revocs could get on such a short notice even with all their political and economic clout. Unfortunately, this gave them quite the ego.

At least, until said ego butted heads with her sister's.

Never before did she hear "With all due respect" spoken with "Go fuck yourself and your opinions" boldly plastered all over and covered with neon lights in such a calm, dignified voice. The looks of abashed submission she saw on balding middle-aged men's faces at a single teenager's reprimand were absolutely priceless - worthy of the title of a national treasure, even. Honestly, sometimes she wished that she had more time (or a half-second's interest) to attend and record such conferences.

She had to give one hell of a kudos to her big sis, though. Spending so much time cooped up in a single room with a bunch of boring suits personally would have driven her insane.

Hands gripping the wall after stuffing the phone into Senektsu's side pockets, she managed to slowly make her way across the room towards the cargo elevators, using the painted concrete as a crutch of sorts while the rest of her muscles and tendons knitted back together. Limping into one such elevator, she all but collapsed against its walls the second the floor selection was made and polished metal doors closed, relishing the sensation of cold steel against overheating flesh. Barely cognizant of the car's movement, she stared at the LED display as numbers scrolled by, watching as single digits became double and climbed past the thirties.

Forcing herself back onto her feet when steel doors slid open again, she was greeted by a sparsely decorated white hall. Still limping, she made her way out, supporting her weight against the bare walls and heading toward her destination - the student council wing.

Or more specifically, the side-room that belonged to her sister.

Save for a couple minor changes, the entire wing looked exactly like how it did under the older Kiryuuin's tenure. Long white banners with the academy's logo still hung from the ceiling, albeit somewhat torn and tattered from the war, like ghosts of the past, lingering unhappily in the present.

Navigating in the dimly lit corridor with all the care and grace afforded to a partially-handicapped body, she all but slunk into her office, almost walking into the red-velvet armchairs that sat in front of her desk. All but collapsing into the similarly-colored plush chair, Ryuuko yawned, her faithful kamui following in suit with her as he stretched and

settled against her skin. Snuggling against the seat's red velvet and eyeing the heavy textbook that lay haphazardly strewn on her desk, she fought at the urge to sleep, at the crushing force on her mind that all but screamed at her to shut her eyes.

But...

She had to try for Mako's sake. She'd promised to try harder in school, after all.

And try as she might, the neatly printed text in front of her started to waver, worsening the more she tried to force herself to concentrate. Words became gibberish in front of her eyes, neatly printed kanji and hiragana turned fuzzy at the edges and inadvertently re-read several times over. Deciding that reading could wait a while, she fiddled with her phone and set an alarm (and at least a half-dozen others following afterward) for a couple hours before school began. Pushing the book away, she allowed herself to rest, cheek touching the cool surface Satsuki's old desk provided.

The last thing she thought before her eyes closed and mind quieted was how perfect expensive woods were as an impromptu pillow.

-0-

Morning.

Rays of golden-white sun turned soft by the cloud cover that seemed to perpetually linger around Japan these days streamed through an expansive window, splashing across two forms lying on a bed. The early morning's chill lingered about the room like a ghost, freshly fallen snow easily driving the room temperature down by a dozen degrees. Cream-colored silk sheets littered with discarded pink clothing messily wrapped around their bodies and pooled about their waists, dripping onto similarly-hued carpeting below. The smaller of the two nuzzled against the other's breasts, lazily curling an arm around their side to bring them closer. A pleased purr rumbled from a sleepy throat in response. A hand decorated with nails left unclipped for far too long delicately scratched at a golden-haired crown before moving down along the curve of the younger's spine. Trails of burning red blossomed on bared skin after what could only be accurately described as a claw raked over them.

Nui keened at the touch, pressing her body to lie flush against Ryuuko's and wedging the crown of her head against the soft of the other's jaw. Similarly alien hearts beat in sync, geminal organs separated only by the white kamui's decorated fabric. The seamstress' fingers moved, slipping from their place between golden sewn-on decorations to now lie under a baby blue scarf, cupping the delicate mound of flesh that lay beneath. Hatred forgotten between two bitter enemies and replaced with added fuel to their violently dysfunctional passion, the delinquent rumbled in approval. The younger responded back in kind, merry songs about death and dismemberment idly hummed against a backdrop of woven alien cloth.

Ryuuko fisted a thick lock of golden hair, savagely yanking the younger's head back to expose the gentle curve of her jaw and a delicate neck. Nui giggled as tendons and bones creaked in protest, alien tissues straining under the other chimera's might. Ryuuko grinned, tongue running over bared teeth at the sight before clamping down on unnatural flesh. Blood streamed forth, threatening to drip onto the sheets - all to highlight the perfect set of teeth-marks that marked the expert seamstress as hers. She pulled back, eyeing the sight with unreserved glee.

Absolutely fucking beautiful.

Pulling Nui against her, she rolled so that she lay on top of the seamstress, straddling the blonde's hips with her legs. And with a hungry growl, she dove, aiming to mark supple flesh with fanged teeth once more.

-0-

She woke, sweating and disoriented, head slowly rising from the desk as the darkened interior of Satsuki's former office swam back into view.

"What... what the hell was that...?" Ryuuko whispered to herself in disbelief, wiping the sweat from her brows with the back of an arm.

She sat up, rubbing her temples. Nui's face flitted before her for the briefest of seconds, the blonde's childish, overly cheerful visage locked in the center of her vision. Ghostly remnants of the couturier's voice whispered in her ears, cooing her twisted melodies and only rattling the chimera even more.

A dream...? ...Or a nightmare?

Ryuuko concentrated, scrunching her brows. Fingers gently scratched at the back of an arm, remembering the way velvety warmth and the lingering pleasure of someone else's touch tickled the skin there. Something about the scene seemed innately familiar - a part of her life she didn't wholly remember thanks to the blurred rush of emotions Junketsu's possession made her experience. In fact, didn't life fibers have the ability to alter memories or erase them completely? The pervert tried to explain it to her, but at the time, all she really wanted was for him to hurry up and sign her discharge sheets so that she could get out of the hospital after being confined in there for so long. Satsuki, Mako, and the rest of Nudist Beach tried to fill her in on what happened during the weeks she wasn't herself, but as much as they tried,

there were still large gaps in her memory. And as hard as she tried to focus on this dream to divine anything from her “past life”, the images began to slip away, become muddled.

Something about waking up? ... Her and a naked Nui in a bed ...?

She shuddered in revulsion, instantly thinking of something else. That memory... was best left forgotten.

Briefly waking her phone, she saw she had another hour or and a half before the alarm went off. The phantom weight of exhaustion still rested on her mind and body, and she sagged, rubbing a reddened eye with a hand. The prospect of having another early start to the day’s work (when did Satsuki rub off on her this much, she wonders) wasn’t as nearly appealing to her overworked, still-aching body. She agreed.

Yawning, she rested her head upon the desk once more, hoping this time her sleep was dreamless.

-0-

She stood in the middle of a field, an empty expanse of white marred by black. Although there was neither a floor underneath her feet nor a sky above, her feet registered pressure and an omnipresent light seemed to encompass the entirety of the void. Curious now, she stepped forth in a randomly-picked direction, ignorant of the way the emptiness pulsed and vibrated, how the air seemed to burn with invisible fire.

The land’s condition only worsened the further she travelled; great shards of the earth beneath stuck up at odd points. Shadows doggedly snaked about her feet as she continued her journey into the void, seemingly intent on swallowing her whole. Eventually, she stopped before a great lake, its body littered with misshapen rocks that randomly protruded from the waters. Looking across motionless waters, she espied a mansion-like structure on the other side, the building strangely pristine and undamaged. Where heavily doors guarding its entrance would be, a white square of light stood, edges glimmering in rainbow shades the slightest bit.

Intrigued, she carefully made her way across the trail of slippery stones, bare feet gripping smooth rock by her toes. Touching down at the mansion’s base, she looked at the wavering square once more, now shocked to find that it now displayed blurs of grey that shifted and squirmed within its confines. Finding that nothing happened when she briefly stuck a hand through its body, she took a chance and fully crossed its threshold.

And abruptly, the void changed into a meadow. Long strands of grass tickled at her calves and ankles, brushing against bare skin as they danced in the wind.

A great ruin soon appeared in front of her, ominously towering over her diminutive form with a single great column alike that of Honnouji Academy's central tower seemingly touching the sky. White concrete set aglow with an invisible sun dominated the empty, grassy landscape; a dull halo of halogen white encircling the building's form intensified with every step she took towards it. A single bronze bell more than twice her height was nestled within the structure at its peak, right where the student council meeting room would be.

Cautiously, she reached out and brushed a palm against the length of the doorway, brushing against intricately carved wood in awe like it was her first time here.

Well, it would have. This wasn't the first time she'd been here, but it was the first time she'd actually approached the crumbling wreck of her own volition. She'd explored the exterior for a while, even going so far as to circle the building completely before making the split-second decision to duck inside.

An intricately sculpted statue was missing from its carved white pedestal; she spotted its shattered remnants underneath a spider web pattern cracked into the wall. Frayed piles of thread that were intricate tapestries lay in sad piles atop stained and ruined carpeting. And shattered glass from windows long burst by incredible pressure made colorful mosaics on filthy flooring. Glass mixed with plaster and marble, colored shards of what used to be stained-glass paintings faintly glimmered in the dim light.

Hesitant, she crossed the vast room, steps taken two or three at a time like a frightened doe. In a bid to explore every inch of it with a wary eye since she last visited, she pressed herself against walls and slunk in the shadows, crushing fragments of porcelain on her way.

"Ryuuko," a soft, melodious voice spoke, somehow carrying effortlessly throughout the massive structure.

Her ears twitched, body instinctively turning towards the sound's source as it tickled her mind, sent her thoughts into a blissful tizzy. The most beautiful man she had ever laid eyes on waited patiently for her at upon a white stone altar, gloved hands neatly clasped at his front. Short, white hair was painstakingly styled, every hair locked into place. Genial red eyes peered at her, urging her to come closer. Unbidden, her legs moved, carrying her towards the altar.

She smiled tenderly, not even questioning how the building seemed to perk up as she continued down gold-filigree'd red, how white material blossomed around her naked body to cover it in an intricate dress or how the chapel's damage seemed to reverse itself - marble and stone becoming sleek and polished once more. He extended an open hand towards her, bidding her to take it by its fingers and join it once more at her rightful place by his side. She

obliged, reaching back, eyes turning soft the longer they drank him in. Their fingertips grew closer, separated by mere millimeters.

An image flickered in her mind, fuzzy at the edges but terrifying all the same.

A pair of jaws parting, shark-like teeth growing closer and clamping down to consume her whole.

The hand turning into a monstrous, misshapen claw.

She hastily withdrew, eyes shut and fingers curled into tight fists. Forcefully conjuring a mimic of her trusted partner and confidant's voice, she shook her head, trying to get the last of the fog out of her brain.

Ryuuko, **focus.**

She blinked hard once. Twice. Enough to get the vision of a perfect husband out of her mind's eye.

Sensing her hesitation, its hand darted forward, fingernails sharpening into talons to bury deep into flesh and anchor themselves there. She leapt back the same time racing streaks of black pooled from the soles of her feet like spilled ink, the wave bursting from the floor and securely latching themselves onto it. It let out an indignant shriek as it was sharply yanked to the ground - the liquid instantly solidifying to a tar-like substance -, slashing at her with claws longer than her hands.

She fled, the dress and chapel dissolving in nightmarish streaks of black and grey, whirling about her in a violent cyclone like an unstoppable drain.

Legs swiftly carried her out heavy wooden doors that sought to trap her within the building and through the wavering gateway that led into the void, trading the meadow and its chapel for the fractured, indistinct part of her mind some part of her sardonically dubbed 'purgatory' in keeping with the zealotic elements of her brainwashing once more. Ryuuko chanced a look back through the mansion's doors, startled when the building no longer existed. In its place, a square of blinding white light that pained her to directly look at without squinting floated, rushing toward her like an oncoming train. There was no pain as it shot out through the gateway and collided against her, only a flurried rush of half-formed flashbulb memories that seared themselves into her mind once more.

She was 7 again, abandoned by the one person who used the term 'parent' as liberally as one could ever think possible.

She was 10, a scruffy girl with a developing mean-streak hiding hurt behind bravado, forced to mature far earlier than her peers.

She was 13, new to junior high school, still lonely, still hopeful, still wondering when the call to come home would come.

She was 16, mere months away from shouldering a bloodied scissor sword and starting a string of high school raids in a bid to find her father's murderer, unknowingly about to cross paths with her long-lost sister and clash head-to-head with her in the process.

She was 17, newly married with her soul forcefully bonded by her mother's devious machinations and fitted in the most beautiful wedding dress ever created.

She was 18, baptized by blood and fire and water and ice - the ultimate champion of humanity's self-determination.

She was 0, and on November 16, 2013, on the very lands she perished on nearly two decades before, she was reborn.

-0-

With a hushed squeak of metal hinges, a heavy door slid open, hallway lights framing a short-haired figure standing at its entranceway. A beam of soft yellow light spilled across the carpeted room, highlighting at the far end of the room a sleeping figure hunched over an expensive wooden desk, papers piled and spilling about its figure across the stark white surface. Extreme exhaustion was all but plain as day on their face; hair as unruly as wild beasts somehow rendered even more tousled than usual, and the forbearers of dark circles started making themselves comfortable under their eyelids. Quiet snuffles escaped their nose. A small puddle of drool collected about a parted mouth and threatened to reach the edges of *very urgent* and *very important* paperwork that would send the likes of Gamagoori into a theatrical tirade should even a corner be ever so slightly scuffed.

But for the first time in quite a while, there were no subtle twitches that wracked her sister's body, no spasms of discomfort or anger that flitted across her face. In fact, there was nothing at all.

Satsuki's heart - once locked and mistrusting of even the oldest and most loyal of her friends - softened. Her entire body slumped the slightest bit as the day's stresses seemed to instantly vanish the moment she looked upon her long-lost little sister and see her well. She stared, lingering in the doorway, almost hesitant to step inside. Not when this scene seemed so peaceful, when it seemed that doing such a mere act would break the illusion, would send the rogue delinquent screaming into nightmarish fits once more.

Ryuuko...

Was she finally freed of worries? Of endless torment centering upon her alien nature hounding her every turn of her life?

Was she finally at peace?

With a small smile, the former student council president finally pushed the door the rest of the way open with a foot. Comfortably holding a steaming porcelain mug in each hand and a neatly folded blanket over an arm, she slid along the door's width on her back, careful not to let the heavy door slam on her and knock her precious cargo out of her hands. Softly, so as to not prematurely disturb her sibling, she padded quietly across the long stretch of space. Heeled footsteps muffled by thick gray carpeting navigated around the mess of papers the office now seemed to possess.

In the days following the graduation ceremony, the meager belongings she allowed herself to possess within school grounds were neatly packed away and moved to a small apartment within the two-star district. Now that the Kiryuuin manor was reduced to ashes and the remaining properties set to be auctioned off, it seemed only fitting that she stay close to the place she raised as a fortress against an impossible foe and built up as her empire. And while the student council meeting room had practically remained the same since her tenure (sans the overabundance of Nonon's plush toys and Houka's many computer monitors), her former personal study now held more than a mere semblance of someone living within its confines. The walls now had the occasional motorcycle poster or one of Mrs. Mankanshoku's many handwritten platitudes that were neatly written on cheap, colored rice paper and slipped along with her adopted daughter's daily lunch. Pictures of Ryuuko and Mako (and occasionally of herself) were nestled within handmade frames on the white desk, the red-banded owner reverently placing them above everything else - mandatory paperwork included - so that they always remained in full view for all to see.

Satsuki crept closer, spying the "pillow" her sister had chosen to use. Stifling a soft laugh, her gaze travelled past a heavily tousled mane of hair, locking upon the discarded book's chapter title in the page headings.

Brain Rhythms and Sleep, she read, eyes flitting back and forth over textbook descriptions of neural mechanisms and her sister's cartoonishly exhausted face. *Still haven't changed, I see.*

Individual life fiber strands still somehow lively despite their host's incapacitated state rippled and twisted and wriggled when she drew too close for their liking. She held her breath as they writhed, seeking out the source of the disturbing presence as if they had a mind of their own (and Satsuki was almost entirely convinced that that was still the case). Tail ends locking on to her, they lashed out against this perceived threat. Steaming-hot liquid sloshed violently as the fibers wrapped themselves around a wrist and squeezed, threatening to spill over the mugs' lips and further anger the tendrils below. For a moment, she held still, watching her hand gradually turn deep red. And just as her skin turned a concerning shade of purple, the fibers seemed to note her inactivity and stopped. Sluggishly loosening their death-grip, dimly glowing ends trailed up her arm and curled around her shoulder. Snuggling against the elder Kiryuuin's body heat and taking advantage of the extra human battery

present, the fibers briefly shuddered as their host shifted in her sleep before falling limp again.

“Ryuuko,” she gently whispered, watching as the vines implanted along her sister’s back twitched the slightest bit at the sound of her voice.

“Mmrgh,” the chimera grumbled, stubbornly nuzzling further into herself and sighing in contentment when the flat of her forehead and curve of her nose found its perfect complement atop a forearm.

Gently exhaling through her nose, she set the mugs safely onto what little bare space her former desk had, and lightly scritchd at the fibers snarling her arm with her free hand. Ryuuko seemed to shiver at her touch, mumbling something under her breath.

“Ryuuko, wake up,” Satsuki urged again, this time insistently prodding at her sister’s cheeks and nose in true ‘annoy-the-younger-sibling’ fashion.

And she did.

Satsuki covered her mouth with a hand, politely stifling a laugh at the look of her little sister’s lopsided, indignant expression. A fierce glare meant to convey her annoyance was ruined by half-lidded eyes and uncooperative eyebrows, Ryuuko’s glower reduced to something akin to a disgruntled child’s pout. Sitting up, the younger wiped the lingering trail of drool away with the back of a hand, grimacing at its sheer amount. Gripping tendrils of life fibers fell away, slithering into place along a spiked back and curling comfortably around the raised white points.

The elder extended her blanket-covered arm, indicating the mink-like material with a bob of her head and a knowing smile. Ryuuko took the proffered sheet with uncoordinated, drowsy movements, eagerly rubbing her face into its softness. Tucking the thin black blanket tightly around herself, the former delinquent let its top pool around her horns in such a way that Satsuki can’t help but stare. In a sense, her little sister looked like a hooded forest ranger from tales her - their - father used to tell her when she was a young girl. A cloaked man seeking temporary refuge in an inn, he ushered a trouble and target-marked group into hiding before leading them to safer lands.

“Haseo,” she whispered, and Ryuuko slowly turned to stare at her blankly, vision straining to adjust in the dim lighting.

If the owlishly blinking eyes didn’t give her sister’s confusion away, the flat “Huh?” with mouth comically left slightly agape certainly did.

“Legendary figure,” Satsuki explained, plucking the mugs from the desk and setting one comfortably within her younger sister’s cupped hands after the latter finished turning off her phone alarms. “He was known as a forest ranger charged with defending a village and later turned out to be an heir to a line of distinguished rulers. He was also known for helping lead an army to win an impossible war, marrying a figure many saw as a divine-like being, and peacefully dying on his own terms to allow his heir to inherit his kingdom. He also had

fought alongside an army of fallen warriors, freeing them from the curse his ancestor had placed upon them.”

Of course, the story their father told was entirely fictional - a hidden allegory for one of humanity’s worst crimes against themselves and their fellow man. At that age, she thought the adventures silly, quietly laughing to herself at the thought of nine men playing keep-away with a simple engraved piece of jewelry from at least ten thousand other people. And now, looking at the haggard form over her exhausted, overworked sibling, she feels only the slightest bit of embarrassment at recalling a tale at such a time. But still, she couldn’t help but wonder, couldn’t help the small thought from forming in her mind and entrenching itself there - not when their mutual father held custody over the younger for far longer.

Did he ever do this?

Did he ever tell you the stories he used to read to me every night up until he disappeared?

Ryuuko had nodded absentmindedly as she spoke, only half-listening to her sibling’s explanation in favor of taking a cautious sniff of whatever was in the mug. Visibly perking up at the familiar aroma, a small glimmer of excitement sparked to life in her eyes.

“Coffee,” the former delinquent mumbled in surprise, taking a deep gulp relishing in the strong, bitter taste that only it could provide. “Thanks, sis,” she quieted out, cradling the mug and taking small pleasure in digits warmed by its radiant heat.

“My pleasure,” Satsuki responds, fetching a chair from the front of the wooden desk and setting herself up near Ryuuko so that they both could watch the academy below.

Looking past the floor-to-ceiling windows at the blackened skies above, a thought suddenly occurred to her then, a distant memory dredged up from the recesses of her mind.

‘Know your place,’ Ragyou had often hissed in the ears of those that dared to defy her, whether it be an up-and-coming competitor, a board member that challenged the rationale behind her decisions, or a young Satsuki that had prodded and questioned things that no ordinary six year old should know about.

A small flare of smug defiance settled pleasantly in her chest, feeding a glowing warmth that only burned more intensely as she continued thinking about her triumph over that vile woman. Satsuki’d found her place alright - and saw that it was among the stars, far out of that demented “mother”’s reach.

And now, there they were - sisters reunited, two no-stars on the highest point of the school.

A comfortable silence reigned over them, both content to just sit in each other’s presence. The sisters pensively faced massive windows and stared at the empty sky as the it started to

pale and lighten, casting off its starry robe for the day once more in favor of soft pastels. Satsuki chances more than a cursory glance at the chimera, fully enraptured by the way the rising sun dances in lights and shades across her sister's face. She notes that her features have gotten slightly more defined - her chin and nose became more pointed, and her cheeks had shed more of their baby fat. Even with the younger's more distinct facial features resembling more of their father, she couldn't help but think that the latest development made her appear more hawkish, more like Ragyou. Her eyes, showing no sign of returning to their original blue hue, lit up when sunbeams hit them at just the right angle and colored them with subtle hints of oranges and browns.

Oblivious, Ryuuko continued to nurse her cup of coffee. At one point, she raised the mug and gently pressed it against a cheek to bask in its fading warmth, closing her eyes in contentment and humming approvingly. Deciding that now was the perfect time to break the silence, the elder gently clears her throat.

"It's been a while."

"Mmm," Ryuuko agrees, slowly cracking an eye open to peer at her.

"I almost can't believe that it's been about a year since you came charging in, brandishing your scissor sword and demanding to know the identity of our father's murderer."

"Yeah." Ryuuko agrees, pausing briefly for an open-mouthed yawn. "Now *I'm* the head of the academy. Wonder if I'll get a transfer student trying to avenge their father that I'll have to sic my entire school on this year."

Satsuki repressed a wince, guiltily recalling how eagerly she did so after thinking the young woman interesting enough to hold her attention, to be a source of amusement and an opponent to test her army's strength on until her worth would be completely exhausted. Her decisions were made for all the right reasons, but the knot twisting in her stomach drew tighter the more she remembered how brutally she struck at her with Bakuzan, how the sick glee she experienced watching the no-star endeavor underneath her might intensified the more she struggled and labored. At first, their interactions were merely call-and-response - an attempt to crush a cocky young upstart who threatened to overturn over a decade's worth of work with a foolish pursuit of an equally foolish cause. But then, it grew, the dictator's feelings on her younger rival eventually shaping into something almost like respect - the highest regard merited to those she considered worthy of her attention. The connection between them surged the day of the disastrous Grand Culture and Sports Festival and only grew more after the final battle with their mother.

But for all intents and purposes, their goals were similar - avenging a dead father. The irony seemed almost palpable now - an invisible knife twisting in her guts, pressure uncomfortably building within her chest.

"Speaking of our father, you must have been very close to him," Satsuki prods carefully, feeling her heart clench the slightest bit in envy as made-up scenarios of father and younger daughter together filled her thoughts. "Our father must have meant a lot to you if you fought so hard for him, to get answers about his death even with the numerous amounts of setbacks you surely had faced even before coming to Honnouji."

“Nah, we weren’t,” Ryuuko responds quietly, setting the ceramic cup onto the desk with a shrug of her shoulders. “Can’t remember a time past when I was a kid that I spent more than ten minutes in the same room as him. The thing is...” Trailing off, she stared into space, idly running her thumb against her mug’s handle. And speaking in muted - almost whispered - tones, she continued. “When I was little, maybe like, 5 or 6 years old, I remember feeling sad - maybe lonely? - all the time. Maybe it was because he always was working on something; I dunno. I think I remember thinking that he didn’t like me, that I’d be better off if I wasn’t around. That maybe he’d be happier if I just... disappeared? I think I thought about staying in my room forever, just so he didn’t see me... and I did, at one point.”

Satsuki’s eyes widened. She felt her heart skip, the phantom grip on the organ almost unbearable and only worsening the longer the younger blithely went on. She had the “luxuries” of friends Ragyou approved of, a growing network of personal generals, and the wealth their shared family name afforded. Ryuuko, however, really *was* alone for most of her life.

Ryuuko laughed bitterly, oblivious to her sister’s horrified expression. Her gaze softened, body slumping the tiniest bit more as memories threatened to engulf her. “And I guess I would have stayed put there, but I got hungry. It was only really a year or two later before he shipped me off to boarding school ‘n stuff. And I guess from then on, I was left to fend for myself.”

Ryuuko trails off, almost contemplative. “Me and him... we never really got on too well. I always was getting into fights, and being left behind only made it worse. By the time I reached high school, I was a full blown junior delinquent. I guess he thought that occasionally sending pocket money and a short note would be enough since teens are s’posed to be more independent, but y’know, I still *wanted* proof that he wanted me around.”

“Sis,” she starts, suddenly serious. “D’you think he’d be proud of us? Of what we’d done?”

Furrowing her brows, Satsuki remains silent for the briefest of moments, words twisting around her tongue. She looked at her palms, calloused and roughened from countless hours wielding and practicing with Bakuzan. She imagines her sword, broken in half, the white cords wrapped around the wakizashi’s handle stained a faint red from the blood that *monster* shed after being stabbed that fateful day. She thinks of her sister, who she once considered an expendable pawn and ruthlessly manipulated for her own ends. She thinks of the endless nights spent planning that devil-woman’s demise, heeding her every whim for years so that she wouldn’t suspect her *faithful, obedient* daughter of planning an uprising. And carefully, she speaks.

“I can’t say for certain. I don’t think he would have personally approved of my decision to force thousands to work under my disposal, nor would he of your unintentional murder, but I think he’d understand. I also believe he’d approve of Ragyou being stopped either way.” Looking up, she fully met her sister’s gaze. “Father knew the dangers she and the life fibers posed, going so far as to found Nudist Beach with stolen Revocs funds.”

The corner of Ryuuko’s mouth twitched - whether in approval or uncertainty, the elder did not know.

“Hey, Satsuki,” she says, rough and forceful voice unmistakably quivering with hidden emotions. “Tell me what dad was like... before he became Matoi Isshin. Back when he was still with our crazy bitch of a mother. He’s gotta have been good to you at least, right? He’s gotta have to have cared for at least one of us.”

The elder blinks - the only dead giveaway to her shock.

Ryuuko’s impulsive - she’s always been. And brash, and vulgar, and certainly less well-rounded or mannered than a family member sharing the same blood and lineage as her, to put it mildly. Others her age would push the envelope, slowly asking for more and more permissions to interact with their peers or socialize with the world at large. Teenagers testing the boundaries of their new-found freedom that came with growing seniority. People who have never had the misfortune of being burdened with Ragyou as their parent, needing to get their way through excessive displays of servility or deception.

Ryuuko?

Shoved.

She supposed it was from their parentage - a stubborn force of will that would damn well obliterate anything standing in the way, whether it was a formidable child army or an actual god. Everyone’s heard of an unstoppable force meeting an immovable wall. Most people would think of the two forces being locked in combat, in constant unending struggle. But rarely would one consider the unstoppable force splitting into many pieces of itself to navigate around the wall before becoming whole once more, a force alike water that was vastly flexible in that regard and yet also powerful enough to erode the tallest of mountains.

“Very well,” she eventually replies, acquiescing to her sister’s request with a small smile. “When I was a small child, our father used to take me into his office at the end of the day and set me onto his lap. And holding me against himself, he’d then pick a story from a small pile to read...”

In the near-thirteen years she spent combating Ragyou and surreptitiously working to undermine her ambitions from within, never before did she imagine herself reuniting with her little sister, save for in death should her plan fail or when old age or disease would take her. In the eighteen-plus years she spent living and breathing on this world before the Earth-shaking revelation of their shared blood sent her world tumbling down, never before did she imagine herself in a sleepover with said little sister, lying atop a crumpled layer of blankets

instead of proper bedding. So tightly packed they were in that cramped space, squished between the edge of the bunk bed's corner and the oak-wood dresser-drawer, that they hardly had any space to move around in.

And yet, Satsuki couldn't bring herself to mind it at all - not even the slightest bit. In fact, she was inwardly glowing, her heart pounding and singing in delight, and she wasn't sure if even the adamantine will that powered her through the life fiber war was enough to keep herself from bursting with joy.

How wonderful it was. How truly wonderful.

She looked around, once again awed at the stark contrast the tiny Mankanshoku household held to the sprawling mansion she had grown up in. Although she had only been in the cramped space for a handful of hours, she already felt as if she'd been here her entire life.

She had been treated well by the family, stomach filled and content with the new stew Mrs. Mankanshoku had been meaning to make for a while now. Her nails now sported a fresh coat of shiny blue nail polish, the glossy surface decorated with misshapen white flowers her sister attempted to paint with clumsy hands. Her hair was similarly given such attention; the brown-haired girl teased the hime cut into different styles before ultimately settling on a series of tiny braids that framed her face and tickled her ears whenever she turned her head.

The yellow-painted walls of the household were absolutely plastered with posters and ornaments. Picture frames of the dysfunctional family hanging by bent and twisted nails only seemed to magnify the calming aura the tiny house had, crooked from the brown-haired girl's overly-enthusiastic attempts at decorating with the awkwardly-placed shots of Guts and the five Mankanshokus. Senketsu slept above them on his favorite hanger, freshly ironed and appearing just as content as his wearer below. Stuffed plush animals littered the bunk bed's lower half, spilling from the mattress onto the floor - a growing collection undoubtedly born from a new hobby of Mako's. A hammock of tightly knotted rope and mesh was strung up near the ceiling, swaying gently in the breeze open windows provided. Undoubtedly it belonged to her sister, if the haphazardly strewn blankets and pillows decorating the 'nest' and the younger's inability to properly rest on anything solid were anything to go by.

And speaking of them...

Ryuuko was messily face-planted into a small pile of sheets and pillows, toes twisting into soft bedding as she snuffled and snored away. Unable to rest on her back and sides thanks to permanently attached armored plating gained from her fusion with the white kamui, her poor sister was relegated to sleeping in a limited range of awkward positions on her front only. Mako on the other hand was practically a human coil, able to contort her body to practically

(and surprisingly comfortably) sleep anywhere - a feat that would make the average sleep-deprived college student proud. They both sandwiched her in true Mankanshoku fashion, limbs unintentionally sprawling and somehow completely entangling themselves with hers.

But despite the almost-overwhelming closeness and the sensation of touch against her skin, no alarm bells rang in her head, no rising feelings of disgust and apprehension plagued her.

They made her feel something else instead - a rare bubbling surge of warmth and contentment that pleasantly settled within her chest. They made her feel... genuinely happy.

Safe.

Eyes drifting shut, she allowed herself to truly relax, comforted by the presence of her - and the word made her choke up the more she considered and thought about it - *family*. And as she bid the younger two a whispered good night, she was sure she heard two mumbling voices bidding her likewise.

Chapter End Notes

So I got a couple comments in Down the Road asking to make the scissor sisters happy, because I played “Kick the Kiryuins” a bit too much. Well, wish granted! I now have time to bond them now that the world isn’t ending and things aren’t trying to kill them.

“Haseo” is what “Aragorn” is translated to in the Japanese version of Lord of the Rings, adding to the small collection of LOTR references I’m sneaking into the series.

End Notes

Across the Stream and Down the Road were named for exactly the reason you're thinking of. Thus, they are tied to each other.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!